

Jason Armagost

Things to Pack When You're Bound for Baghdad

In an airplane there was absolutely no place in the world to go except to another part of the airplane.

—*Catch-22*

Literature is history with the truth left in.

—Ralph Peters

Missouri—19 March 2003

THE CLOCK IS PUNCHED FOR WAR IN MESOPOTAMIA. Six hours until midnight, the day before the sudden flourish of air combat. I am suited, armed, and briefed for a 20,000 mile flight. The middle 208 seconds of the journey will be over Baghdad. Tomorrow's strikes will compose the first salvos of "shock and awe."

Our war-birds are carbon-fiber and titanium Stealth Bombers. They idle, topped with fuel, pre-flight crews tending aircraft systems on the rain-damp tarmac of Whiteman Air Force Base. In the course of the next two days, I will stiffen my backbone against exhaustion and battle with Air Force-issued amphetamines, a half-case of canned espresso drinks, and 40,000 pounds of steel and high-explosive. And books.

The Northrop Grumman B-2A "Spirit" is a flying wing—a 60-year old concept writ lethal in composites and computers. In profile, it is racy—a falcon stooping on distant prey. From the front—a menacing winged whale; from overhead—a

wedge-shaped Euclidean study in parallel form. The plane carries aloft a crew of two pilots with the necessary life-support systems—oxygen, heating, air-conditioning, and cockpit pressurization. The pilots sit next to each other in twin ejection seats. The running joke is that the seats don't work because you'd rather be dead than face an accident board having crashed a \$2,140,000,000.00 national asset.

Satiny charcoal in composition with a smooth, blended body, the B-2 is simultaneously rounded and angular. The skin is exotic and TOP-SECRET. Wing span is 172', two-and-a-half times the length of 69' nose-to-tail. It is rare—only 21 were built—but not endangered. It threads the 3-D envelopes of missile defense networks. Stealth has the same effect on defenses as speed, rendering reactions ineffective because they are too little, too late, if at all. This plane will bring us home.

The payload consists of 16 weapons mounted on two, eight-position, rotating launchers in each of the three aircraft of our flight. My primary weapons are 13 one-ton penetrator bombs for hardened targets and runways. The three remaining launcher stations carry the 4617 pound GBU-37 "Bunker Buster." These two-and-a-half ton monstrosities are targeted against deeply buried, steel-reinforced, concrete command centers in a planned effort to "decapitate" Iraq's leadership. In the lingo of combat aviators, these bombs will "prosecute" targets. Rarely—unless talking about Saddam or his sons—is killing mentioned. We are distanced. We make "inputs" into a network of flying computers. I manage the ghost in the machine.

Our enemies label us the "Great Satan"—moral descendants of the Paladins of Charlemagne, Protector of the One Church. I don't know if those we aim to liberate call us anything at all. We are armed to strike from the air, over the land, between the two rivers.

I have brought a bag of books and journals to pass the hours of tedium. I am bound for desert places.

Over Indiana at 35,000 feet. Our wingmen in position two and four miles behind us, stacked up in altitude. We have settled into our roles and tasks. We have momentum. I boost out of the left seat and leave the colonel in the right to man the stick and throttles. A thick Bible is cradled in his lap.

The cockpit is brimming with electronics, maps, target photos, food, bottled-water, and standardized military duffels containing "comfort items"—sleeping bags, air mattresses, pillows, black foam eye-masks to darken the day, noise cancellation headsets and extra earplugs to stifle the rhythmic thrum of the engines. I sort the mounds of bags to locate my combat survival vest. There it is, folded and resting for war against a circuit breaker panel. It is choked with maps for evasion on the ground, water packets, radios, night-vision goggles, a fixed-

blade knife, compass, firestarter, handheld global-positioning-system (GPS), and a 9mm handgun with 3 full magazines. I pull the vest on—right arm, then left—zip it, and try to locate specific items with my eyes closed. It weighs 28 lbs.

I have supplemented the standard equipment with my own essentials stashed throughout the seven pockets of my flight suit:

3 tubes of Chap Stick, medicated
 Toothbrush, floss, and travel toothpaste
 1 oz. tin of Bag Balm—cow-udder salve for dry hands
 Nail clippers
 Aspirin, Acetaminophen, Ibuprofen, Vitamin C, Multi-vitamin,
 Immodium, Iodine, Band-Aids, Saline Nasal Spray, Eye-drops
 Baby wipes in a plastic sandwich bag
 Sunglasses
 Swiss Army knife
 Duct tape

In a stained and ratty helmet bag I have a small library of books and personal journals:

Heartsblood: Hunting, Spirituality, and Wildness in America
 —David Petersen
The Shape of the Journey: New and Collected Poems, and Just Before
Dark: Collected Nonfiction—Jim Harrison
Winter Morning Walks—Ted Kooser
Nine Horses: Poems—Billy Collins
A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997—Wendell Berry
West with the Night—Beryl Markham
Fire Road, and Aftermath: An Anthology of Post-Vietnam Fiction
 —Donald Anderson
The Things They Carried—Tim O'Brien
Winter: Notes from Montana—Rick Bass
Burning the Days: Recollection and Dusk and Other Stories
 —James Salter
Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West
 —Cormac McCarthy
The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories
 —Edited by Tobias Wolff
A Voice Crying in the Wilderness—Edward Abbey

The Art of Living and Other Stories—John Gardner
Hunting the Osage Bow—Dean Torges
The Norton Book of Classical Literature—Edited by Bernard Knox
Don Quixote—Cervantes, Starkie translation
Gilgamesh—Translated by Herbert Mason
Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot—Jim Stockdale
Wind, Sand, and Stars—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
The Longest Silence: A Life in Fishing, and Keep the Change
 —Thomas McGuane
The Nick Adams Stories—Hemingway
Gray's Sporting Journal—Aug 2001 & Nov/Dec 2002
The Iliad and The Odyssey—Homer. Robert Fagles translations
Beowulf—Seamus Heaney translation
 Four leather-bound journals in various states of wear

At the bottom of the bag, amongst the books:

Stainless-steel Colt 1911A1, .45 ACP with custom night-sights and
 four loaded magazines—in a nylon chest holster
 Four pairs of wool socks, black silk long-johns, three brown undershirts,
 two pairs of flannel boxer shorts
 Blue, fitted-wool, logo baseball cap “YALE—*Lux et Veritas*”
 Black & white photo of my wife, son, and daughter

These things, these books, are a measure of security. A redoubt in war. They bring me comfort in their many ways. The books have all been read. That is the point. In the middle of the Atlantic I won't be interested in the cheap plot-twists of the latest bestseller. I'm in need of art—recklessness, patience, wisdom, passion, and largess. I rifle through the titles, grab five, and return to the seat. We are over Ohio. Me, my books, and the colonel.

Much later, the Med, splitting the Strait of Gibraltar.

To the north, Spain. From the library bag—Cervantes: “But all this must be suffered by those who profess the stern order of chivalry.” And: “My judgment is now clear and unfettered, and that dark cloud of ignorance has disappeared, which the continual reading of those detestable books of knight-errantry had cast over my understanding.”

Don Quixote was, and remains, redemption for a maimed veteran of the Battle of Lepanto and seven-year prisoner of the Saracens. Four hundred years later, we

are bestowed the unwisdom of the knight and the fidelity and candor of his man Sancho. I pray he squires me now.

To the south, the Atlas Mountains heave up through the sands of North Africa. Over the water—low, scattered, vivid-white cumulus clouds. Time, distance, and history are crammed in the 14 kilometers severing continents. The sea below is a Homeric wine-dark against the early afternoon March sun. Our Mediterranean flight plan ushers us through international airspace to minimize the political complexities of trucking weapons to war.

Valencia.

Barcelona.

Marseilles. The lilting music of a female French air-traffic controller's voice. She knows we are USAF bombers. Our documentation conceals nothing. I expect contempt in her voice, but hear none. Her warmth suggests a kind of condolence. A sadness floods me when she hands us off to the next controller.

Italian controlled airspace over the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Mindful of the *Iliad's* great tactician and diplomat Odysseus. Hunkered at the siege of Troy for 10 years, he brokered the egos of Agamemnon and Achilles. With the deployment of his Trojan horse, he became the technological progenitor of the plane my enemies won't see. Unbeknownst to Odysseus, during his 20-year absence, his wife Penelope would weave a death shroud during daylight. In the eventide, she would unweave this tapestry and forfeit her art more in fear than in hope. She gave 20 years of her life to a war at the eastern edge of the known world.

My wife is named Diane; the Roman conflation of Artemis, goddess of the hunt, daughter of Zeus and Leto, sister of Apollo. In seven hours, back in Missouri, she will press RECORD on a machine tuned to CNN's live coverage from Baghdad. One of my targets is Saddam's main Presidential Palace. It looms in the backdrop across the Tigris River from the hotel where journalists shoot their footage. At 11:04:25 Central Standard Time, a long series of cracking explosions will send dust and fire into the sky in a televised close-up. Diane will cry when she sees anti-aircraft artillery and missiles racing skyward. She will hide her tears from our young children. She will claim that I didn't warn her.

Eleven hours in—steering southbound 30 miles east of Sardinia toward the Strait of Messina between the toe of the Italian boot and Sicily. Odysseus' six-headed Scylla and devil-vortex Charybdis hunger five miles below the pregnant bellies of bombers. A couple of times an hour, someone in the formation offers a joke on our discrete radio frequency. We laugh and make smartass comments even when the joke isn't funny. We are all reluctant to resume the silence.

I snap open my fourth lukewarm Starbucks's Doubleshot. I can smell the coffee through my dry skin. In the preceding 36 hours I have "flown" the bomb runs four times on a computer simulator back in Missouri and hundreds of times since in my head. Two weeks ago, we practiced the Baghdad portion of our bomb runs over Omaha at two o'clock in the morning. Method, repetition, and judgment. One human part of a vast system set in motion.

The colonel twists in a crouch over green computer displays. A technophile living a technophile's dream. The computers are his decorous armor to any debate over the consequences of our words and deeds. Me and the colonel. We're different. We each need the other.

Ionian Sea, west of Greece.

Again, Homer, the "blind poet." When this 39-hour mission is over, I will have seen three "rosy-fingered dawns" and like Apollo the Archer, I will have "come down like night" over the skies of an ancient city.

As Homer's prelude to western history suggests, virtually everything revolved around honor and courage in battle for the warring Greeks in their poleis. Death and the horrors of war were acknowledged as tragic, but their constancy and proliferation paled in comparison to the everlasting honor gained through a display of fierce strategic genius, the first virtue. The *demos* elected and impeached the men who would lead them into battle. Generals—*Strategos*. The electorate rewarded skill, intellect, courage, compassion, and wisdom. They had their politics. They had their heroes. Both were accountable to the people.

I lift Stockdale's book from where it rests on the glareshield. Handwritten on the inside cover is a note I penned six years ago when I was living in rural northern Japan, flying "Wild Weasel" missions in the F-16. It is from Clausewitz's *On War*:

The soldier's trade, if it is to mean anything at all, has to be anchored to an unshakeable code of honor. Otherwise, those of us who follow the drums become nothing more than a bunch of hired assassins walking around in gaudy clothes... a disgrace to God and mankind.

Admiral Stockdale survived seven-and-a-half years as the senior ranking officer in Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camps. Malnutrition. Torture. Fear. Guilt. *Four years of solitary confinement*. He had no books—nothing physical to anchor himself. In his mind, he bore the great Stoic philosophers Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. "Character is fate." After the war, he received the Medal of Honor; but more than that, he was possessed of honor.

The colonel breaks the silence over the intercom. "I'll be heads down in the navigation systems for awhile." I nod.

Ezra Pound once suggested Homer was an army doctor because of his keen descriptions of the honor displayed and the horror rendered in combat deaths. I seek honor in my post-historical air war, but it is difficult to match deeds with the ancients. I am cloaked in the conceit of technology.

I look down at a map and figure angles and distances in my head based on our current heading. The Greek Peloponnese is off our nose, out of sight, over the horizon. Ancient Sparta. I look up and left, past the wingtip. Honor is, at best, diluted in the binary code of the most advanced airplane in the world. I place maps and mission papers in a lidded case behind the throttles to my left and pull out the *Norton Book of Classical Literature*. I linger on a highlighted section of Hesiod. By his description, the Olympian gods were petulant, arrogant, inhuman. When brilliant—yet inevitably flawed—mortal heroes approached the gods in deed, their deaths were tragically orchestrated. But they lived on in myth. They reflected great truths. Truths that were refined with the first spoken art. An art that began around campfires, in caves, in long-halls, on wooden ships. The poems and stories we have always needed to bring meaning to random acts of man and nature that thwart our best plans.

Tonight, I will shoot Apollo's silver bow that never misses. I will be miles above the Olympian mountaintops. The skin of the airplane that shields me from my enemies' eyes also shields me from renown. Popular stories of airmen are more often about machines pushing the limits of human capacity and endurance (I almost let the F-16 kill me numerous times) than about the nature of the individuals who pilot them. Technology trumps our shared human nature. I tell myself that my actions will help save the lives of soldiers who are racing north out of Kuwait. This is honorable. It is not honor.

Socrates. Sophocles. Aeschylus. Thucydides. Pericles. Xenophon. Demosthenes. All clarified their moral, physical, and intellectual courage on the fields of battle. The immediacy and closeness of war led them to believe that they would rather die fighting than live as another man's slave. As the ability to project power over great distances has advanced with technology, the question I must now ask is: will I *kill* to free another man's slave into a world that may be more chaotic, anarchic, and dangerous?

Aeschylus' epitaph mentioned nothing of his considerable poetic legacy; only of his having served as an Athenian officer at the battle of Marathon against the "longhaired" Persians. "In war," he wrote, "the first casualty is truth."

The radio hums and barks. I don't recognize a word the Greek air-traffic controller is saying. Apparently my wingman can translate his English, so I

swallow the pride of a flight lead and let him have the radios until we get handed off, southbound, to the controller out of Cairo. The Cairene and I are talking over each other. Clipping transmissions. He orders our flight to climb above 30,000 feet. After we do, he no longer answers our queries. The radio silence is peculiar and I wonder if he is searching for a supervisor to turn us around and give us back to the Greeks. The coast looms. Southeast on the veiled horizon I can see a brown cloud of civilization mixing over the Nile delta from the pollution of Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt's two largest cities. The cloud trails off to the east as it rises and meets the lower reaches of the jet-stream. The sky above fades to the deep blue of altitude.

Nineteen days past was my 33rd birthday. Two months older than Alexander the Great when he died in Babylon. The age of Christ at crucifixion...

A handwritten fragment of Heraclitus from a small black notebook carried in the thigh pocket of my flight-suit:

*Fire of all things
is the judge and ravisher.*

Egyptian airspace—12 miles inbound.

The coast that bears down is 30 miles west of El Alamein and another 30 miles from Ptolemy's Alexandria where, according to Plutarch, arrogance and betrayal among Roman factions led to the destruction of the greatest library of the ancients. A fire at the Temple of the Muses. The most extensive collection of the genius of the Hellenes. Gone. Who can forgive Julius Caesar his "collateral damage" when Alexandria burned?

Nothing but sand in all directions now. The pressurized, treated air in the cockpit tastes coppery. The B-2, like every aircraft I've ever flown, blows hot air in your face while your feet are bitten by frost. I have learned. I am wearing merino wool socks so thick that I have been shoeless since shortly after takeoff. Quite probably, this is against some regulation.

90 minutes later. Still only sand. Saint-Exupéry and the Sahara Desert country of *Wind, Sand, and Stars*. Somewhere east of our current position he crashed an old prop-driven airplane in 1935 while trying to set the speed record from Paris to Saigon. He made wonderful art from his ordeal in the desert that nearly consumed him. "It has become impossible to say whether love or hate plays the greater part in this setting forth of the warriors." My mission is not to establish speed or endurance records. I carry bombs.

I safe the ejection seat, and unbuckle the shoulder harness and lap-belt. I tap the colonel's shoulder and gesture to the food in coolers behind us. He passes a

thumb's up and I press out to stand in the 18-square feet of real-estate between the chemical toilet and the port bulkhead of the cockpit. The cooler lid creaks as I lift it and pass a roast beef and cheese sandwich forward. Needly pain in my lower-back and legs. I dance a jig—elbows bent tight, fists clenched chest-high, feet bouncing heel-toe, Scottish warpipes ripping my imagination. I twist from the waist and jab-jab, right-cross, dipduck, feint, left-hook, combo uppercuts to the liver and chin. Arms raised in victory, I declare myself the undisputed welterweight champion above 30,000 feet. I shake out, roll my head left, then right, and crumple to the non-skid rubberized floor. I build a “nest” with a camping air mattress and a drab, canvas sleeping bag. I unwind into the bag and compel myself to relax. The lower third of my body rests on the closed interior door of the entry hatch. Even though it only opens inward, I imagine plunging through every time I step on it; disgorged from the aircraft. Wind-tossed terminal velocity. Shoeless death.

I roll up to a sit, reach around to the map-case, and grab the last book I was reading. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. I fan the mangled and tabbed pages. Highlighted passages and penned marginalia flick past my eyes like a grade-school notebook cartoon. Without reading the words, I recall tempers and thoughts that came to me as I knew the book for the first time. Undistilled violence promoted to high art. Ares—god of war—come to the 1840s southwest border country as the mercenary Judge Holden. He never sleeps and never dies. He speaks all languages. Artist. Scientist. Shaman. Preacher. Liar. Killer of children. Eventually, he will have us all.

A yellowed, grocery-list bookmark falls from page 248 where orange highlighting burns the judge's explication of war into the page:

*It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge.
War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was
always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate
trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was
and will be...*

*War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the
unity of existence. War is god...*

I lay the open book across my chest. I'm over Egypt. Land of Pharoahs. In two hours we'll arm and test the weapons. In the colonel's jargon, a “function check.” I yawn continually because (I forecast) I am spiraling into oxygen debt. It unnerves the colonel in the right seat because he imagines I am unserious

about my duty. I rise and gaze out the port side windscreen, leaning forward from behind the seat.

Eastbound. Fifty miles ahead is the narrow-gauged Nile River valley—a shock of vegetation. The ground-shadows highlight the Valley of the Kings just across the river from Luxor and Thebes. The Great Temple of Amun and Ramses III. The Temple of Isis. Necropolis. The pyramids at Giza are over the horizon to the northwest.

I grab a leather-bound journal from a helmet bag stained with hydraulic fluid and engine oil. Crossing the great river of Africa reminded me of a quote I copied into the journal a couple of years ago from an essay by Korean War fighter pilot and author, James Salter. There it is, written in smeared blue ink backed by faded yellow highlights: “Literature is the river of civilization, its Tigris and Nile. Those who follow it, and I am inclined to say only those, pass by the glories.” I will overfly both of these rivers—twice—within a matter of hours. Further down the page, Jim Harrison. “Great poems make good prayers.”

Over the engine noise, I hear the colonel order the trailing wingmen to stack up from our altitude in 500 feet increments to compress our reserved air-traffic block. The wingmen check their air-to-air radar as a precaution against the coming night. We are lit from below by a sand-blown, blood-orange sun that is waning below the horizon. The sun god Ra has already set for those in the valley beneath the plane. The late purples and reds of the desert contrast the underwhelming gray and black of the cockpit glare shield and switch consoles. The only colors stab out from eight computer cockpit displays. Through these we manage our mortal cargo.

The desert air cools rapidly, generating light turbulence. The plane pogos every few seconds. I return to the seat and buckle-down until the sky darkens and the chop calms. The night is a quiet blessing. The world closes in as the sky opens with stars. The radios grow silent with the dark. Beryl Markham wrote that there is no twilight in Africa. Only night’s sudden reclamation of the land. This reclamation is the haven of stealth. We own the black sky and the radar spectrum over distant countries.

The arid emptiness cleaved by the sudden green river-valley over the left wing looks like a *National Geographic* photo. Glancing back to the darkening horizon, I imagine a Saharan nomad tending his camels and searching the sky for the low, quiet booming of three B-2s en route to a war that has not yet begun. In words and deeds, what of our humanity do we apportion? My flight coveralls are designed to protect me in a fire. For these long hours in the air my religion is fuel. My spirituality is speed. Every tanker who gives us gas is my muse, pushing me onward. I breathe supplemental oxygen at combat altitudes (sometimes switching to 100% oxygen in a rush to gather my thoughts). My great-grandparents, early in the last century on the unbroken plains of Nebraska, were the last of my American family to struggle

hand-to-mouth for survival. I cruise at high-subsonic speeds, 10% of the distance to the lower reaches of orbital space. What of the gazing nomad? Does he carry books with him in his travels or does the weight come at too high a cost? Would he fight an enemy with a sword? The curved scimitar of a mounted warrior? Yes? He would have to watch his adversary breathe his last. Watch his eyes glaze. *Feel his death rattle on the tip of his blade*, knowing that he must protect his family, his tribe, his very life. Rubbernecking up, would he recognize me as a man in this black machine six miles above the desert? Would he think me a bat-winged demon?

Pacing again, I center-up between the seats and look forward over the aircraft nose. The colonel is still banging on the data-entry computer and bumping the throttles periodically. I should try for another 20-minute nap while he has the controls.

Back into the nest. I won't doze until well after the Baghdad fire-walking stunt; a pretender to sleep and dreams.

Eyes closed. I cross into the territory of mind.

Clarity. Courage. Ambiguity. Context. These perceptions gain meaning and momentum through the processes of literature. The one thing, I believe, that burns through the veneer of civilization to gift us glimpses into the eternal truths of human nature. *The things we know but cannot name*. The books I pack in my flight gear: poetry, short stories, the world's classics, collected essays, glossy hunting journals with ads for \$40,000 shotguns, and poetry. Poetry first and last. At the controls, you can't disengage for more than about 30 seconds at a time. Darting attention and wandering thoughts; a prescription for lucid, brief, simple, and majestic words with the strength of memory. These words and their accompanying images provide thoughtful interruptions to the method and repetition of long-range flying. Life is given nuance between the lines. Between the soulless aircraft checklists designed to protect you from yourself.

Perched crossways on the half-zipped opening of my bookbag is the frayed copy of *Heartsblood* by David Petersen. On the cover is *The Hunter* by N.C. Wyeth. With eyes still closed, the image focuses in my mind. The painting renders an idyllic Ojibwa hunter standing ankle-deep in water. He quarters right, toward the viewer. Naked but for skins wrapped around his waist and a red cloth tied close about his hair. Over his left shoulder is slung a Canada goose, wings askew, black-beaked head hanging limp by the hunter's knee. The hunter looks away, over this burdened shoulder, toward barren trees and a V-formation of geese flying south for the winter. He is wildness, simplicity, freedom, and hope. In his right hand, a wood selfbow with a buckskin-wrapped handle.

I am that hunter. I build and hunt with primitive bows. I scrape wood with stone blades. It is experience stripped bare and it brings me, wrapped in stealth technology, closer to that hunter, closer to existence and the actual costs associated

with living. It is the opposite of meaninglessness or absurdity. On the ground, I am a living mixed metaphor of radar-absorbing material and the ancient woods of bows—hickory, ash, osage-orange, yew. I fancy a bow in my mind.

A straight-grained limb with no twist cut to an arm-span's length. The face or "back" of the bow under tension, wider near the grip and tapering toward the nocks that hold and center the string. Width controls draw weight. In profile, thickness is uniform, excepting the buckskin wrapped palm-swell at the handle. Thickness controls the bend throughout the length of the limbs. Unstrung, after the bow is finished and shot-in, there is a slight string-follow where the wood "remembers" the compression stress put upon it. When the bow is strung, there is a gentle, even curve throughout, the string seven inches from the belly of the handle. At full draw, the bow is a crescent—a new moon. If the wood is well-seasoned and I honor the craft, my bows pull 45-50 pounds at a 28-inch draw. They will cast heavy, wood arrows flat and fast.

Universally similar to the hunting bow just described, the selfbows of hunter-gatherers are simple and streamlined. The perfect weapon a stealthy woodsman might use to kill large prey animals reliably inside of 20 paces. With a dried stave, a passable hunting bow can be made in hours. These weapons of survival became more complicated when they evolved into the implements of warring pastoral and agricultural societies rather than tools of food procurement for nomadic peoples. The ancient Scythians did not perfect their high-performance sinew and horn horse-bows to hunt the steppes. The building process would have been inefficient for a man struggling to feed his family. These weapons were purpose-built for defense and brutal subjugation at range. Without hitting a major bone, these bows could be shot through two lightly-armored footmen lined up in ranks. From the back of a rushing horse, they were more accurate than a GPS weapon with zero collateral damage. Warrior-nomads like the Scythians became specialized and wedded to the geography that bore them. Primitive rituals evolved. Organized warfare became a principal ritual over and above the struggle to survive and protect resources.

Centuries later, the Athenian General Thucydides commented on war as a function of fear, honor, and interest. The agricultural and pastoral Greeks sought decisive battle in the open field as a cultural expression of strategy. They were known for their disciplined and courageous infantry. The Greeks favored spears and short-swords in close-contact fighting. In contrast, the weapons of loosely organized cavalries were primarily bows. Archers control distance in a tactical engagement. The Scythians, and later the Huns and Mongols, were the peoples of stealth, deception, and hit-and-run, guerilla-style warfare. Marauders on horseback, they treasured the bow in war and were deadly at range. They

were undisciplined, individualistic, and tribal, but rarely were they lured to fight western forces in a decisive, pitched battle.

The cultural effects of bows start early. At the age of seven, Tatar boys were no longer provided food by their family. They only ate what they could steal or kill with a bow. If they lived to adulthood, they were vicious archers from horseback.

The Persians were bowyers. They were more culturally decadent than the nomad-warriors, but they knew the spiritual value of archery. During adolescence, the sons of Persian nobles were sent to live with shepherds and farmers. They left the courts to learn horsemanship, to learn to tell the truth, and to learn to shoot straight.

The bow is complete and I carry it now in my ritual. It is osage; the most difficult, most rewarding bow wood. Locating a tree straight enough and long enough is to find one in 10,000. Snaky and twisted, the bow is orange-brown with dark, closed grain. It pulls 48 pounds and has a rawhide string. The smooth-burnished wood is conditioned against weather with melted beeswax. This bow is a bridge to another world or at least to what is real in this world. It shoots true.

Once a week, during the lunch hour, I drive west out of the gate at Whiteman Air Force Base to the south parking lot in Knob Noster State Park. If any cars are parked in the lot, I leave. If no cars, I park my beater pickup in the shade of an old-growth Shagbark Hickory. In spite of any weather, I strip from my uniform and hop-step into a pair of black nylon running shorts that my wife thinks are unfashionably high-cut. I remove the smooth-worn truck key from the key-ring and place it, solo, under a rotting railroad tie in the dirt parking lot. No shoes. No watch. No thing. I cross the unnamed creek that borders the lot and join a trail that will draw me deep into the hardwood forest. If I plan on gathering river cane for homemade arrows, I pause on the creek bank to scrounge a good piece of flint. I rough-out a stone knife to cut bent cane close to the ground. I will carry it with me to where I know the cane grows straight and then toss it when I have six good stems. The spiritual rewards of inefficiency.

If it is hot and humid, I linger in the relief of a light breeze on the ridge-tops. If the mosquitoes are swarming, a light coat of creek mud, a quickened pace, and an end-of-run dip in the flowing creek keeps me bite-free. If it is snowing or raining, the pace is faster, breath blowing through my nostrils like a horse. Steam rises off my shoulders. My stride changes without shoes blocking me from the earth; I glide low and smooth on the balls of my feet down a game trail. I see wild turkey, whitetail deer, red fox, possum, cottontail rabbits, and coyote. If the ground is quiet from a recent rain or the wind is blowing—if I measure my approach amongst the shadows—I get close to deer. Mere feet. I listen to the rippling alarms of songbirds and squirrels as I skim along the trail. My mind

is quiet, movement purposeful and clean. Wood bow light in hand. The deer calmly survey, tails flicking. I am a hairless wolf. An unburdened predator. My kill comes clean and quick from one fire-hardened, stone-tipped arrow cast from full brace. I overcome distance with an arrow to compensate for the weakness of my instincts. It is *my* arrow that vaults from *my* bow and kills the deer whose eyes I look into as it breathes a final breath. I possess the deer and become the deer when I feed my body. My hands are dry. Feet cold. Armpits stinking. Owning the death I brought. Purging the toxins of a plastic-wrapped, military-industrial complex life.

I am stealth. I am time and distance.

Scandalous shorts, mud camouflage, calloused feet, a bent stick, and lithic tools. My ritual.

The harmonic buzz of the turbofans prods me out of mind, to the dimmed Egyptian desert. Recurring questions about the task at hand: What have I forgotten? Do they know I'm coming? Are the surface-to-air missile operators trained and rested? Are their minders leaving them to a futile chore or are they pointing pistols at the back of menaced heads, ordering them to launch the surface-to-air missile or face an apostate's death? "Shoot down the Yankee Air Pirate and your family will be esteemed for seven generations."

Your feet are cold, your skin is dry, you eat and eat, but you hunger still. You smell like coffee, sweat, beef jerky, and fouled shearing seat-cushions.

Back on task.

The Kingdom of al-Saud.

The darkened Red Sea approaches. With it comes temporal dilation. Demarcation. A few hundred miles northeast lies a city that will soon spit fire and become fire. Swirling fighters will haunt the periphery of southern Baghdad while I ghost-in through the backdoor and bring hell from northwest to southeast. The city will hunt me down, but in the radar dark it will not find me. The city will not know I'm there until I'm gone, and gone's too late.

I twist into my chest holster and rack the slide on the old 1911. I thumb the safety up and slip the comforting heft into the tight holster that is now under my flightsuit. The firearm will be covered and secure should I have to eject at upwards of 80% of the speed of sound. At .80 mach, the B-2 technical manual states, "moderate to severe injuries are likely." If I am shot to earth, my library will burn in a heraclitean fire. If I am shot to earth, Iraqis will hunt me. If I am shot to earth, the smart thing is to bury the handguns because grounded pilots are most brutalized and likely to be killed with their own weapons by their initial captors. To the government and the military, I am a political weapon. To the people living

under a state-controlled press, I am Satan's proxy. These men and women who have covered with their families in ditches and alleys from Saddam's thugs and American bombs.

Back in the seat, the jet-stream winds are rapidly swinging between west and south and back again. The nose of the B-2 hunts left and right to maintain the planned track. I get a status report from my wingmen, Raccoon 32 and 33. The jets are in great shape with almost no oil consumption; weapons and aircraft systems tight. No target or route changes. All as briefed.

I can avoid the drudgery of the computers no longer. I re-confirm the latitudes, longitudes, and altitudes of targets to the third decimal point of minutes of degrees. Crossing into Saudi Arabia I will power all 16 weapons with three switch actuations. The dedicated weapons computers will begin a deadly calculus of delivery. Within seconds of release, the latitudes and longitudes will be sent to the guidance units on the bombs. The most complicated drops involve the three "Bunker-Busters." In their parabolic flight, the 18' missiles will have accelerated to 1500' per second when they strike within feet (often, inches) of the intended objective. Upon sensing the deceleration associated with impact, the internal electric fuse will begin the countdown to detonation-charge ignition. No one will hear the bomb's supersonic approach to the target. Milliseconds later, the earth under Saddam's Presidential Palace will shake and fire will shoot from the domed roof. A "Special Issue" of TIME will portray this on the magazine cover, one week from now.

Written in yellow chalk on the dark-green steel bomb casings are words. Traditionally, weapons loaders and aircraft crew chiefs write sophomoric death taunts, love poems, and eulogies for friends lost to terrorists or combat in the Middle East:

"If the house is a rockin—don't come a knockin"

"Forgive us our trespasses and forgive them their sins..."

"For all you do, this bomb's for you"

"When it absolutely, positively has to be destroyed overnight—USAF"

"For A1C Brian McVeigh—Khobar Towers 25 June 1996"

"All you need is love. Love is all you need."

“Saddam—Mess with the bull, get the horns! Johnny T.—Dumas, TX”

“If you’d stop gassing Kurds and Shiites—stop torturing your own people—we wouldn’t have to shove this candle up your ass and light it. Love—Tiffany S.”

“May freedom follow chaos—Chief”

The colonel, earlier in the flight over Nova Scotia, told me that he inspected every weapon the day before we took off, now two days past. Every steel lanyard, bomb-fin configuration, power connection, and fuse setting. He told me he wrote a proverb on a bomb body and took digital pictures “for the squadron history books.”

The Saudi coast passes right, then left, out of sight under the aircraft as we angle over the coastine.

Standing now, the colonel fiddles with an obviously nonfunctional piece of satellite communications equipment. He has spent at least five combined hours of this flight resetting and rewiring various components. There is no dead horse that he believes a proper beating won’t revive.

From the right seat, I snap up the colonel’s worn, leather-bound King James Bible. A silk bookmark in the Psalms of David. In chapter XXV, verses 19-21, the following:

Consider mine enemies; for they are many; and they hate me with cruel hatred. O keep my soul, and deliver me: let me not be ashamed; for I put my trust in thee. Let integrity and uprightness preserve me; for I wait on thee.

I could have criminal charges brought against me by Al-Madina, “The Authority for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vices,” if I were standing on Saudi sand caught in possession of this Bible. Interrogated and beaten as an infidel. A forced confession, but for the grace of altitude.

We have the fuel to complete the mission and hit the post-strike tanker. Our timing is spot-on which means our bombs will hit on time, to the exact second. The British controller passes word to us that all support aircraft have checked in. There will be no timing slips. The war is to start on time.

Northbound now for our piece of it. We “push” far to the west, flanking our support aircraft. Serving deceptive ends, as we crossed the border into Iraq, our call-sign changed from Raccoon 31 to Squeak 31. It doesn’t much matter because

we are radio-silent. A roving black hole of electronic emissions. We are over the moonscape Iraqi desert, southwest of Baghdad. Over the nothing. It's quiet from without and from within. The winds have settled strong from the west. The weapons computers are grinding. We wait...

The books are stowed. My mind is still darting.

I read to rage against the constriction of my profession—the barbarity of all over-specialized professions. I look east to the kingdom of Uruk—the city of Gilgamesh—through the green haze of night-vision goggles. I know the first story written down, the oldest story in the world. 1000 years before the Old Testament. 1000 years before *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *Gilgamesh*:

*As when one senses
Violence gathering its force,
Soon there is no sound apart from it,
Not even one's own thoughts in terror.*

In a long-slow, right-hand turn to the southeast, I have arrived at my foregone conclusion. The possibilities of the day have all expired and action stands as the final test. I am in the Iraqis' space. They are not in mine. I am the sovereign nexus of ideology, weaponry, and a clash of civilizations.

Over Tharthar lake, just upcountry from Fallujah. The Sunni triangle. *Don't punch out here*. The orange sodium lights of the city crystallize as they approach, sliding down from the far horizon. The power grid is not targeted this night. 5,000,000 people mark time with the lights lit. The Tigris a black velvet ribbon scoring the city. High cirrus clouds reflect the lights above our altitude. Wispy mare's tails. Maintain track right of course for winds or the autopilot won't hack the turns and the bombs won't release. I would *never* live that down.

A flood of words over the intercom, "Pattern management, weapons ranging, tapes running, target #7000, one GBU-37 on the Command and Control bunker, minute-forty to release." Right of course. Tracking.

"Checks. Switches up, clean and green, auto, station L-8 is a GO."

The small caliber anti-aircraft artillery is difficult to spot in the glaring brightness of Baghdad. Not that it matters. Only the largest rounds can reach us and the one that could hit us, we won't see. I force my gaze up to the darker horizon and the clusters of sparkling air defense rounds detonating closer to our altitude. Squeak 31, flight of three, is alone now. Above the air-raid horns and journalists and people and confusion. Our support aircraft are marshaled around the southern borders of the city. Anti-radiation missiles and massive amounts of communications and radar jamming cloud the electromagnetic spectrum. We are

a whisper in a very noisy, very dark room. The colonel is stooped over his situation displays tapping furiously.

The surface-to-air missile launches are starting. Three to our left on the east side of town and one off the nose. Un-aimed. Un-disciplined. We are—and remain—stealthy.

The colonel switches his focus to the weapons displays. I search my mental catalog for a Churchillian saying, something for the “squadron history books,” a meager attempt at a redemptive appropriation of wisdom. Nothing. We have our own radio frequency. It’s scary quiet above the melee.

“Sixty seconds.” The number two wingman, Squeak 32, south of us, moving directly west to east will have a weapon release in 17 seconds.

I crank my lap-belt tight and finger the grip of my pistol. Up to the horizon, look left, look right, left again out of habit. Another surface-to-air missile to the east—brighter—probably an SA-2. I watch it detonate above our altitude, guessing 10 miles away. Its final act, a steel rain on the Iraqis below to be blamed on the Americans later, I’m sure.

“Thirty seconds, in the release corridor, stand-by for doors on the left. Next release 7001, 31 seconds following, two 37s on the bunkers below Uday’s palace.”

I am winding up. Breathe. Center. Work the routines. They can’t find us. They’ll know we’re here when they see the explosions on Al Jazeera. “Doors in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... Weapon away, target 7000 at 1803:30 Zulu, doors closed. Impact at 1804:25. Shack timing, delta zero. In the corridor for 7001, L-6, R-8, clean and green, switches up, auto.” Another SAM. More AAA. The eastern edge of the city is passing under the nose of the aircraft, but we will be lit from below for another two minutes. We are not producing contrails. I crave complete darkness. I want Plato’s Cave. I want these missiles to be the shadows of perfect missiles, our bombs to be the shadows of bombs.

Sometimes you must do a bad thing to stop something even worse?

Make it so.

208 seconds and out.

Tigris means “arrow” in Old Persian.

The air war was “victorious” in weeks. Fixed targets destroyed, statues toppled. Museums looted. Thus endeth the “major” fighting, but there are unclaimed dead throughout the buried bunkers and desert landscapes of Iraq... Babylon... Ninevah... Nippur... Ur... Uruk... Iraq. How many dead? In the aftermath of the air war, some now may be mine. Bodies disintegrated in holes below once lavish palaces, terrorist camps, command centers, and barracks. How to think on these things?

Three years later and I have not yet gathered the memories surrounding my three-week war. I tallied two missions—the first and the last for the B-2s flying from Missouri. These are the barest of facts.

My war memories start here; 15 years ago I had a writing teacher who made—in my mind—a manifest and abiding link between great reading, writing, and a life lived well. A life that recognized and rewarded gentleness, empathy, artistry, and grace. After becoming an officer, and during the 12 years following as an aviator and student of aviation, I read when I was able and wrote little. I flew F-16s and B-2s all over the world with brief periods of combat action in both. In six months “on the ground” in the Middle East, I witnessed one terrorist bomb detonate and I came quick upon the aftermath of two others. One—Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia—was monstrous. Then 9/11. I was roused to fight.

As a pilot, I have fallen into bed for years hoping that I know enough, that I’m skilled enough to keep myself or my wingman alive through whatever imagined tragedy awaits us during the next day’s flying: engine fire, mid-air collision, spatial disorientation, G-induced loss of consciousness, hypoxia... It can be easier to compartmentalize these morbid notions and train and train and train until you have acquired the expertise—even the art—of supersonic violence. But don’t imagine that you might not compartmentalize your humanity in the process just because survival is paramount.

For years, I worked desperately to not be the lieutenant in northern Japan who made a late decision to eject from a miserably executed takeoff abort due to a minor engine problem. A cascading series of errors and indecisions that ultimately had him parachute into the fireball of his own tumbling F-16. He died eight weeks later from a staph infection. His wife was 23 and his picture now hangs in a fighter squadron bar. Six years later, new lieutenants ask: “What’s his story?”

The story daunts them. Daunts their sense of confidence in themselves, but they charge on. Later, at their homes, in bathroom mirrors, they lecture themselves: “That won’t be me. I’m good. I’m better.” At the bar, they raise their glass and exhort one of the most common axioms among pilots: “I’d rather be lucky than good.” There is that, but that is not nearly all and it’s no comfort to those who loved, and love, the dead.

I’ve seen literature, faith, family, and friends equip those peripheral to a sudden loss as harrowing as this with the armaments necessary to defend their souls. Choice lies mainly in the first two. Faith and art for trials like death and war and what comes after. Conviction is personal and art is communal. Problem is, you must constantly strive for their possession *before* you need them.

Walking into the local market in my uniform, I avert my eyes from those I suspect will acknowledge me for service to the country. “Thank you for what you do” is difficult to hear. I am confounded by their innocence. I smile and nod—no words. I am embarrassed because troops are dying and I am here, buying fresh asparagus, wine, and apples. These people are kind and gracious, but I can’t tell them what I have done because I don’t know what’s buried in the bunkers of an ex-tyrant’s palace. I know I left over 36 tons of high-explosive and weapons-grade steel in Iraq. Buildings destroyed, bunkers mangled beyond recognition, airfields once bombed to submission—now in use by our own forces. It is conceivable that I killed no one. It is, however, very unlikely.

I turn back to the *words*. Words I would like the people in local markets to read and own. Own and live. I read and write and read.

Hemingway wrote, “There are worse things than war and all of them come with defeat.” I believe that—but just because one thing is worse than another, it doesn’t make the lesser good. Just less bad.

Once more to Heraclitus, 2600 years ago:

*War, as father
of all things, and king,
names few to serve as gods,
and of the rest makes
these men slaves, those free.*

Even the free then, are subjects to war, and dying for freedom is easy, at least for the dead.

This is no boast. Killing’s something apart.

I sit on an overturned canoe amongst budding wild rose bushes on the bank of a mountain lake that is named on no map. My son and daughter are fishing for trout and throwing pinecones at mallards. My wife is seven months pregnant. She sleeps on a couch in our small cabin with our youngest daughter. They are warmed by the late-morning sun piercing a picture window. I look up from Victor Davis Hanson’s *Ripples of Battle*. My daughter beckons me to untangle a snag in her fishing line. I grab my fly rod and stride down the thorny bank to help her. The last paragraph I read before placing the opened book on the boat says:

So battle is a great leveler of human aspiration when it most surely should not be. Stray bullets kill brave men and miss cowards. They tear open great doctors-to-be and yet merely nick soldiers who have a criminal past, pulverizing flesh when there is nothing to be

gained and passing harmlessly by when the fate of whole nations is at stake. And that confusion, inexplicability, and deadliness have a tendency to rob us of the talented, inflate the mediocre, and ruin or improve the survivors—but always at least making young men who survive not forget what they have been through.

From a kneel in the cold water, I roll-cast to a rising trout from the shadows of an overhanging cottonwood. Stealthy even now. A slow retrieve and... nothing.

I have begun a new bow. Bamboo and cherry wood.

I will hunt elk in the fall.

I will make rosehip jam with my children.

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